

Interview with H. L. Mencken (Transcription)

W12 Side B

A. I was a little confused after that ride over from Baltimore. Did you ever see such a hideous boulevard in your life? I suppose they have boulevards just as terrible, but I'd never seen any no, no. It's a disgrace to humanity and our country.

Q. Why?

A. Well, because it represents the American lust for the hideous, the delight and ugliness for its own taste. It's very <gap> it leads to the <gap> of the United States.

Q. I remember that you were using that phrase quite often when you wrote for the Sun paper: "The American Libido for the Ugly"

A. Yeah.

Q. That was a favorite topic.

A. Yeah, <gap> but such horrible exhibitions are not due to mere ignorance <unintelligible text> to life and the ugly which if you go down the street to <gap> on a summer night you can look in 'em usually they're illuminated more or less and you notice you go sometime for 2 or 3 blocks without <unintelligible text> a single object that's not <gap> not a single

Library of Congress

thing, not even a picture on the wall or a carpet or a rug. Then all of a sudden you see
<gap> a house <unintelligible text>

Q. <unintelligible text> 1524 Holling?

A. No, mine is not one. But there's a colored woman that lives in the alley behind me who in a little four room house does a swell job decorating.

Q. You were born in one of those 2-story row houses, weren't you?

A. No, I was born in Lexington Street <unintelligible text> near Freemont.

Q. And you still live in one of those 2-story houses?

A. It was two stories, the one I was born into. My father bought the house I'm presently living in, in 1883.

Q. It's a more of a great success in a Baltimorean when he was born in a two-story house and worked up to live in a three-story house.

A. Yeah, yeah that is; but I had to, unfortunately. Didn't come up from that log cabin. My misfortune was that my father was well relatively well-off. It's been a curse for me all my life. Nobody would've believed me <gap> They think the idea in America is that no man is worth listening to unless he's had some experience in sweatshops.

Q. What are your earliest <gap> recollections of Baltimore as a boy?

Library of Congress

A. Well, I've written a book describing them. My first recollection is the Orioles played in Baltimore making history. I've been told by psychologists and other <gap> you couldn't possibly recollect anything earlier under 3 years old

<gap> But I remember it. I recollect it very distinctly and it wasn't told to me. <gap> was extraordinarily hot in summer and sultry, full of flies and mosquitoes; all kinds of epidemics were running simultaneously, but the people liked it. Food was cheap; houses were comfortable, although we slept on the mosquito net and I look back on it with great affection. I realize it's limitations <gap> and the water supply was bad. Typhoid raged all summer, small pox all winter and malaria at all times a year. I had malaria, but I skipped typhoid and small pox, how I don't know. I think I skipped small pox by a vaccination <gap> when I was about two years old and the scar would show enormous. It's still big as a half dollar on my arm and no vaccination that I've ever had <gap> I've been told that that's no proof of anything, but nevertheless

Q. What school did you go to?

A. I went to school kept by those <gap> named <gap> known to Americans as <gap>. The school was down in <gap> where the war memorial is now and there's a private school; I went there until I was 12 years old and then I went and transferred to <gap>

Q. That's a high school?

A. Yeah, I never got beyond <gap>. I graduated <gap> very early, I was only sixteen and never went to school since, thank God. Most who skipped college have a regret <gap> but I most confess I'm much too vain to have any such regrets <gap> what I was doing when

Library of Congress

the boys of my generation were in college, listening to idiots like <gap> football games and doing all the foolish and silly and useless things college boys do. I would be <gap> or on the streets <gap> a young newspaper reporter in a big city, at that time, lead a life that has never been met on earth, for <romance?> and interest

Q. <gap> and I think there's an interesting story as to how you got your first job.

A. No, the story is not interesting; I simply applied for it and got it. I never was a good reporter.

Q. <gap> ran out and came back with something stupid.

A. No, I never got a script in my life. <gap> they never seemed to have anything. Most scripts were bad stories and they were always exaggerated <gap>. No, I wasn't a good reporter except in one sense that I worked. I was given work. I <gap>

Q. For what papers did you work?

A. I started with the Baltimore Herald and the was the end of my days as a reporter <gap> very early at 23 <gap> right afterwards

Q. What paper?

A. <gap> and hence, I did very little reporting after I <gap> to 25

In the earlier years, I went back to reporting as a kind of volunteer, but I did only <gap>

Library of Congress

Q. When did you begin your association with the Sun paper?

A. About 1917, I'd say. That's when The Herald blew up. I was then managing member of The Herald and the thing blew up under me, and I hear young reporters talking about the <gap>. I've been told admirably three times in my life and every time to my advantage.

Q. <gap> did you have a definite goal in you at the time you were working as a newspaper man?

A. No, I was so busy I didn't have time to do anything and I wrote short stories, and when I was twenty, I wrote a short story that attracted the attention of later editor of The Atlantic Monthly and <gap> took an interest in me, and in fact offered me a job on the magazine he was editing in New York called <gap> Popular Monthly <gap> became friends and have been friends ever since. In so far as anybody discovered me, it was <gap>

Q. At a certain point, you established a <gap> in New York, in what you might call a literary circle and begun commuting back and forth? How did you do that? How did that come about?

A. Well, in 1908, I think it was, I was offered a job, of writing a monthly literary article to the <gap> that was one of many offices I was getting in those days; I was getting fairly well-known among the magazines for me to do. I took it because it didn't involve going to New York. I disliked New York and still do and didn't want to go there, didn't want to live there, and I wrote that article for six years and then <gap> when the war came on in 1914 and threw a complicated series of events that are not interesting; George Mason and I acquired control of the <gap> He had been doing a little shorter than while that I had

Library of Congress

article on the <gap> and he ran the magazine as <gap> editing for ten years and it was very valuable to him. He had the dream of every young writer; we had a magazine that we controlled and we printed everything we wrote without any interference by anybody else; <gap> most of the stuff that I printed in the <gap> some of it was quite expensive could not have gotten into any other known magazine of that time. Well, in the end we both got tired of it and I did especially and <gap> had a bad title which we couldn't change; we short of money and there wasn't any future in it. We <gap> out of the area, so we decided to start another magazine and we started The American Mercury <gap>, which was an enormously different magazine. The <gap> was the most dreadful piece of printing in New York and The American Mercury was the <unintelligible text> piece of printing that has ever been done in an American magazine. Well, we lasted ten years there and I decided to quit.

end M1 A

Page 1 of 2 Transcript of cassette tape M1 B begins---Accents---Jack Phelan

Regional accents are gradually disappearing in this country. This has to do, it seems to me, with <unintelligible text> exposure <unintelligible text> to radio and TV, people moving about from one area to another, and <unintelligible text>, by ridicule--from teachers, associates, and even "friends". As an example of accent modification let's consider the Low Country accent, characteristic of eastern South Carolina. First we will hear a relatively unaltered Low Country accent in a young woman born and raised in a small town in the area: *(Subject A, reading "Song of the Chattahoochee", Sidney Lanier) Now hear the voice of a young woman born and raised in the Charleston area, educated in a South Carolina University, <unintelligible text> living later in other areas of the country, and joining the sales force of a large nationwide corporation. First, South Carolina universities are no kind to Low Country accents--they tend to dilute them, deliberately. Second, in the sales job with the national company, she felt that her original accent was a detriment,

Library of Congress

and she tended to consciously suppress it at least on the job. *(Subject B, reading "Song of the Chattahoochee") Turning <unintelligible text> to New York City, as least two of the colleges there, Hunter and also Barnard, are adamant about eliminating certain <unintelligible text> provincialisms from the speech of their graduates, but the basic accent is untouched. For example here's a young woman, a native of New York who attended and graduated from Hunter College: *(Subject C, reading from Chap. 7, Beautiful Swimmers, Watermen, Crabs, and Chesapeake Bay, by Wm. W. Warner) Another young woman, also a native New Yorker, <unintelligible text> graduated from Barnard College: *(Subject D, reading from the Warner book, same chapter) Two poems by Sidney Lanier "Song of the Chattahoochee" and "The Marshes of <gap>" are used extensively to give a more even comparison between speakers when possible. The next speaker who was raised in Mississippi, spent 20 years in Alabama before moving to Tennessee. <gap> lived there approximate <45?>, lived in Alabama about 20 yrs. I shall read "Song of the Chattahoochee." *(Subject E, reading "Song of the Chatahoochee") It is a far remove, geographically, from Mississippi to Maryland, you listen to this young woman who was raised on the Eastern Shore, and subsequently spent several years in middle, Tennessee at Vanderbilt and in East Tennessee. She had just returned incidently from a year in England in the Oxford area at the time of the recording.

SEE ATTACHMENT FOR TEXT TEXT NOT IN MY POSSESSION

Page 2 of 2---Cassette: "Accents"---by Jack Phelan

I was born in 1955 on the Eastern shore of MD in Snow Hill and lived there till I was 18 and then went to Vanderbilt University in Nashville and have lived in Tennessee for the past 10 years. *(Subject F, reading "Song of the Chattahoochee") The last portion of this tape gives us a more extended example of the South Carolina Low Country accent: *(Subject A returns, reading "The Mocking Bird" by Lanier; part of "Posson Jone", by

Library of Congress

George Washington Cable; "Evening Song", by Lanier; part of "The Marshes of Glynn", by Lanier.)

* See attached sheets for texts of Lanier and Cable material.